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ATTEMPTS AT DECENTRALIZATION, FOREST MANAGEMENT AND CONSERVATION IN SOUTHEASTERN CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT The concept of decentralization consists of the breaking down of heavy government machinery into smaller administrative units at the local level. This article attempts to examine the decentralization and forest management in the southeastern region of Cameroon, as well as their impacts on the way of life of the local population (Bantu and Baka). This study is based on a historical approach and socio-anthropological analyses, and highlights the difficulties faced by the public administration in the implementation of these new dispensations at the local level. Further, this study equally demonstrates the non-appropriation of the new management tools by the parties concerned. This therefore explains the reticence of the central administration, administrative delays, and its adoption by the Bantu and Baka.

Key Words: Decentralization; Deconcentration; Forest management; Local population; Baka; Protected zones; Nature conservation; National parks.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1994, Cameroon has witnessed several ambitious reform strides in the forestry sector, as well as in the sustainable management⁽¹⁾ of its natural resources. This is reflected in the relations between the local and global market trends as stated by Mawhood (1993) and Huang (1996). As Oyono (2002) underlines, the state is at the center as a policy maker, while the local population remains at the periphery in decision-making. The centralization of the Cameroon forest has never been the most efficient or equitable in matters of sustainable management (Karsenty, 1999).

In the 1990s, policy-makers remarkably changed the emphasis in their speech to include the necessity to take into consideration the rights of the local population (Bahuchet & de Maret, 2000; Milol, 2007), as well as their implication in the management of the environment. Formerly, policy-makers did not take into account the rights of the local community, which continued to suffer marginalization, negligence, and a lack of recognition. The inability to recognize the local expertise in the sustainable management of forest resources inevitably breeds a transfer of property rights.

As previously noted, since the beginning of the 1990s, one could observe a series of reforms of the forest code, and the institution of technical measures relative to forestry resource exploitation. Institutional reforms can be summarized into two principles: (1) the reorganization of national forest zones through decentralization, and (2) the allocation of territories for specific uses (forest exploitation and conservation).

ANALYTICAL THEORIES

The present article aims to collect data, and to examine and analyze it in order to produce an understandable picture of the infrastructural trajectory, as well as the socio-economic, cultural, and ecological effects in southeastern Cameroon. In reality, the manner in which the state organizes and manages the forest in this region struggles as “counter-current” (Delville, 2012) to sustainable management of the environment.

The problem of environmental degradation and the strategies to curb destructive human actions has been taken into consideration in the last century (Salzman & Attwood, 1996). This awareness has led authors to be interested in questions related to sustainable development. Research carried out by Ostrom (1990) has contributed to a new paradigm in the sense that there is a transfer of management or property of the natural resources to the local communities concerned (Karsenty, 1999).

The re-organization of customary space through the separation of zones, forest concessions, and protected areas neglected the forest residents such as the Bantu and Pygmy communities. Despite this, the theorists of collective action have been exercising a considerable grip on theoretical and empirical research (Olson, 1971; Wade, 1987; Ostrom, 1990; Berkes, 1996). These analyses highlight on the importance of the fact that sustainable management depends on the configuration and functions of institutions, as well as on the social organizations regulating this sector (North, 1986; Rutherford, 1996). In the course of this regulation, institutional actors (state “conservationists,” forestry exploiters) lead to the privatization of areas, overexploitation of natural resources, and above all, the lifestyle of the local community.

ORGANIZATIONAL BASIS OF FOREST MANAGEMENT AND CONSERVATION IN SOUTH EAST CAMEROON

The History of the Decentralization of Forest Areas

The colonial powers in Africa, notably Britain and France, have attempted to establish highly centralized local authorities, focusing on human resource management and the extraction of riches (Buell, 1928; Mamdani, 1996; Ribot, 2010). To achieve this, the administrative management of rural areas was transferred to traditional authorities by the British as “indirect rule.” On the other hand, the French extended their influence under the guise of local administration by the bias of “associations” (Diaw, 2010). The colonial masters have used local traditional authorities as state administrators, which can be considered as the local decentralization of power.

The forest sector especially was a vanguard for rural colonialism. Forest agents continued to follow the colonial practices to control rural areas for extractive ends (Bertin, 1918–1920; Ribot, 2010). In the 1910s, the French forest agent Bertin,

who studied the exploitable vegetal species in Africa, developed a new forestry exploitation perspective:

“The final objective towards which we need to develop is to allow the majority of forest work to the natives, as well as the organization of small local interested enterprises or native communities and villages themselves to manage their forest and automatically improve on their efficiency” (Bertin, 1918–1920).

This new perspective marks an important step of normalization of relations between the local communities and the forestry services. It allows the local communities to exploit their forest tangibly, whereby they are authorized to share part of the revenue with the forestry agents. From this viewpoint, Dubois (1997) identifies three phases of forest management in Africa: (1) a technocratic era based on the colonial model, (2) a “participative” period beginning in the 1980s, and (3) a period to come to terms with the reality, which began in the 1990s, based on negotiation. The two latter periods coincide with the beginning of decentralization reforms throughout the Africa.

This decentralization movement brought both hope and frustration. The initial steps to decentralization date far back to the 1960s in Mali, Burkina Faso, and in Senegal, the former being the lone country to implement this project by the creation of rural councils in 1972 (Vengroff & Johnston, 1987; Jacob & Blundo, 1997; Diaw, 2010). These rural councils were immediately confronted with difficulties. Such first attempts were dominated by charismatic postures/posters by “decentralized despotic” forms (Mamdani, 1996; Manor, 1999). In the 1980’s and 1990’s, decentralization was a global movement associated with the Structural Adjustment Policy concerning tax, forestry, and land reforms (Diaw, 2010). Despite these developments, while the stakeholders and backers militated in favor of decentralization, a contra-movement was in operation at the state level. This movement offered little advantages to communities and to the local population (Agrawal & Larson, 2006; Ribot, 2010).

The participative forestry legislation had infested the African continent towards the mid-1990s. A number of these laws have been revised to advocate for decentralization. Cameroon, following the promulgation of the new forestry legislation, had taken the option in 1994 to decentralize forestry management. Long before this period, Francophone African countries had based their forest management on colonial principles, especially on laws drawn from the 1830 Civil Code (Le Roy, 1982; Oyono et al., 2007). Between the colonial period and 1994, the legal dispositions for land tenure placed the forests under the responsibility of the state. A provisional zonal plan developed in 1993 defining the different public uses of forest areas and agro-forest introduced a significant change in management. The 1995 decree of implementation of the 1994 forest law (Government of Cameroon, 1994) constitutes the basis of application (Government of Cameroon, 1995). These measures/instruments form the legal basis of decentralized management of Cameroon forests. On the whole, these reforms aim at three major objectives: (1) promote the participation of the local communities in

forest management; (2) contribute to the fight against poverty; and (3) contribute to the sustainable development of forest resources (Oyono et al., 2007).

The Historical Trajectory of Nature Conservation

Historically, protected areas have been at the center of nature conservation policies. At the global level, the birth of protected areas commenced before the Second Convention of London in 1933, on the conservation of the fauna and flora in Africa (Roulet, 2004). A more conservationist-oriented approach to the management of natural areas became evident. This approach aims to enclose the whole of the ecosystem where any consumer exploitation of its resources was generally prohibited. The early modern game reserves and parks were created in the colonial territories towards the end of the 20th century (Adams & Hulme, 2001; Phillips, 2003). This was a period when the state could forcefully impose its policies, without insightful negotiation with the natives. The first two examples are Yellowstone and Yosemite, created in 1872 in the USA (Roulet, 2004; Diaw, 2010). Following the Yellowstone model, a radical exclusive type of nature protection is spreading throughout the world.

Towards the end of the 19th century, several movements concerned with Western nature protection were organized against the diminution of natural resources. Great concern at this time was necessary to protect species that had high economic value, a logic qualified as “preservationist” (Roulet, 2004). This utilitarian paradigm is engrained in Africa by a bias of the First London Convention, relating to the preservation of wild animals, birds, and fish in Africa, bringing together six countries⁽²⁾ in 1900 (Dommen, 1996).

In Central Africa, hunting reserves emerged to serve as fauna resource reserves. The underlying idea was that the animals must be preserved, but access to Africans was denied. These areas remained accessible exclusively to a minority of whites who wished to perpetrate their hunting passion (Roulet, 2004). Therefore, towards the first half of the 20th century, two principal phenomena in nature conservation and management became fused: (1) the change in perceptions relating to nature and the Western perception of the environment, and (2) the constant degradation of the population of wild animals around the hunting areas.

Along this development process, the vocabulary of conservation is equally evolving. Such evolving terms include “wild life,” “fauna and flora,” and “environment,” before being reconstructed as “biodiversity” (Wilson, 1988; Diaw, 2010). A new governance covering all the categories of protected zones has been put in place at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2004).

In the 20th century, nature conservation changed from an anthropocentric approach in the protection of wildlife species to an eco-centric perception (de Sadeleer, 1994). Even so, the local community’s rights to landscapes continue to remain quasi-inexistent; they are prohibited from traditional usage and spoliation of the land. This inherits the idea behind the creation of the first parks: to preserve the local communities from access to natural resources (Rossi et al., 1998).

Practically until independence, the management of wild life in the colonies was

the responsibility of the colonial administration, and was prejudiced and devoted to international lobbies of hunting (Roulet, 2004). The parks and other reserves tend to look like exact copies as the former geographical limits of the hunting reserves. Several national parks continue to retain the same names of the geographical landscapes which harbor them. This is the case of the Waza and Benoue National Parks and the Dja Biosphere Reserve of Cameroon. It was only in 1968 that the Waza and Benoue areas became the first national parks created in the northern part of Cameroon; according to Flizot (1962), they were originally wild life reserves as far back as 1932.

The community management implies a shift in decision-making from the central administration, and the maintenance of the natural environment under the control of the public administration. The principal point of convergence between the conservation policy and environmental decentralization has been inspired by concepts in social and community forestry exploitation of the 1970s (FAO & CIFOR, 2005; Bradshaw et al., 2007). The first generation of social forestry projects took place in arid and deforested environments. A few decades later, these projects were applicable to tropical forests in the 1980s (Diaw, 2010).

Brundtland's report of 1987 witnessed the first instance where a rational connection was established towards sustainability (WCED, 1987). Instead of the former conservation concepts limited to the wild landscape, "biodiversity" is considered as the wealth of any forest area. This vision found new fertile grounds; the plasticity of this concept of biodiversity creates a bridge between community initiatives of a "free" environment and "open" conservation, involving community participation in management (Diaw, 2010). Such attempts have become more popular today as a result of the numerous conflicts and different forms of popular protest movements on the environment created by the conservationist stronghold (Adam & Hulme, 2001; Brockington, 2002). Political speeches on biodiversity proved to gain more grounds on conventional themes related to conservation, and also give room to the theory and practice of conservation. This demonstrates, as indicated by Escobar (1998), that the policy of biodiversity management is not a stable construct.

The Dichotomy between Decentralization, National Parks, and Conservation

In the 20th century in Central Africa, an important number of growing community conservation initiatives have been undertaken. Their common characteristics included their emergence from the local contexts (Diaw, 2010). The community management has a principal objective of the maintenance of the population in the wildlife zone by encouraging economic incentives. This approach remains within the limits of the social barrier paradigm, in which the people concerned receive economic incentives which act as a protective crown around the park. Hughes & Flintan (2001) qualify the community management projects to the periphery of the parks approach, as an important component of the Integration of Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs) of the second generation.

Diaw (2010), Wells et al. (1999), Enters & Anderson (2000), and Newmark & Hough (2000) believe that the integrated conservation and development projects

were considered a jewel, rejecting the radical conservationists. On the other hand, naturalist or conservation biologists such as Kramer et al. (1997), Brandon et al. (1998), Terborgh (1999), and Oates (1999) criticized the incapacity of ICDPs to adequately protect the biodiversity, advocating a return to the limited participatory tendencies of the 1990s. The arguments sustained by these eminent conservationists were based on a double rejection of development and sustainability (Soulé & Terborgh, 1999).

These developmental trends clearly demonstrate that the criticism levied against the integrated project approach, sustainable development, and the decentralization policies (Dkamela, 2012) was not aimed at promoting a concerted and sustainable management policy in central Africa. However, recent history reveals that this situation could not last long, although the local population, who have full legal rights to address this situation and decide on the best way to utilize their land, has never been duly recognized (Diaw, 2010). If the conservationists' ideology must survive in this 21st century, it is important to expand the zones under "strict protection" in order to constitute interconnected ecosystems (Soulé & Terborgh, 1999).

LOCAL COMMUNITY IN THE SPIRAL OF DEMARCATION AND CONSERVATION: THE CASE IN CAMEROON

Cameroon During the Demarcation Era and Conservation

Since the 1990s, Cameroon has undertaken an economic revalorization of the forestry sector, considering a mine for development which has been under-exploited. The 1994 law constitutes an affirmation of the forest that states that demarcations are destined either for conservation, or as concessions, or even to Forest Management Units (UFAs). As a result, national forest zones were categorized as "permanent forestry estates" (Karsenty, 2006; Bigombe Logo, 2008), constituting the new forest land map of Cameroon.

The law put into place on January 20, 1994 allows for the demarcation of national reserve zones, covering the entire forestry territory. This means "a plan of transfer of land for the dense forest zone in the southern Cameroon region, in view to rationalize occupation" (ACD & MINEF, 1993). It maps out the different categories of the forest to administrate the forest in the attribution of exploitation or conservation. The demarcation plan places a limit on the displacement of the local population near a national park or a forest concession (Yamo, 2012). It was instituted in Cameroon by the Prime Ministerial Decree N° 95/678/98 of December 18, 1995, fixing the demarcation plan of the Southern forest zone, and equally fixing the limits and characteristics of the different categories of forests involved (Nguiffo, 2008).

Drawing on this decree, the 1990 reform law reorganized forest land and estates, and redefined property rights and use. As a result, the protected areas of Lobéké, Boumba Bek and Nki, the Dja Biosphere Reserve, the Ngoyla-Mintom forest, the

Cinergy Interest Zones (ZICs), and UFAs, among others, were created in southern Cameroon. These were emanated from the 1994 reform law (Yamo, 2012). Issuing from objectives of territorial management defined in the 1995 demarcation plan, these forests occupy a considerable expanse of land. They are removed from customary control, and are placed under the state as state property. Generally speaking, the demarcation has the objective to encourage the conservation of the biodiversity, ensuring a legal status to territories which would have been transformed into agricultural fields (Roulet & Hardin, 2010). This situation creates the basis of a difficult cohabitation between the local population and the conservation and development projects.

The local community of southeastern Cameroon, which is mainly made up of the Pygmy and Bantu, has been assimilated by the conservation projects as disloyal rivals (Roulet, 2004). This belief was propagated by colonial conservationists, who have always considered the activities of the local population to have negative impacts in the protection of the environment. Although the spread of this misconception is generally accepted among the ecologists and conservationists, the system of reserves or prohibition of hunting or gathering plants exists in national parks like Lobeké, Boumba Bek, and Nki in southern Cameroon.

The concept held among the ecologists is that “when we wish ‘to preserve’ nature, there is no other solution than excluding disruptive agents and to create reserves” (Rossi et al., 1998). They argue that European hunters act as “sources of good deaths,” and consider their actions a lesser evil, though the native poachers are regarded with an intrinsic negativity (Roulet, 2004). We agree with Olson (1971), Wade (1987), Ostrom (1990), and Berkes (1996) that the institutional policies, stemming from the 1994 forestry decentralization policy, exercise considerable influence over the environment, while excluding the local community from sustainable management. However, one main objective of decentralizing forest management is to take into consideration the local communities as principal actors in the management.

In the same light, the concept of demarcation and conservation highlights the global problem of asymmetric powers between the conservation projects, the government, and the local communities (Karsenty, 2010). This conservation project has become a form of privatization or monopoly of land area to reduce its control and customary activities from the Bantu and Pygmy populations. Local populations will feel dominated by the conservation projects, which restrain their subsistence activities and their social and cultural identity. From the case of the Boumba Bek, Nki, and Lobeké National Parks, it is easy to understand the impact of the conservation projects on their living conditions.

The Regulations of Protected Areas of Southeastern Cameroon

The national parks of Boumba Bek, Lobeké, and Nki are fauna reserves following the nomenclature prescribed by Article 24 of the 1994 forest law. They are “set aside for conservation, development and sustainability of animal life, as well as for the protection and development of its habitat” (Government of Cameroon, 1995). Hunting or any other activity which is not well-organized is

prohibited, except within the framework of sustainable development approved by the Minister of Forestry and Wildlife (Nguiffo, 2001). By this act, the Cameroon legislation has established the denial of recognition of the rights of the local population as an important stakeholder in the sustainable management (Honneth, 2010).

These legal dispositions are in contradiction with the customary practices of the Bantu and Pygmy populations. It is, however, very difficult for the local communities to understand the restrictions imposed, given that the forest knows no other owner besides man who exploits it. This fact is currently misunderstood, and the leitmotif of sustainable development of the environment refers to the effective implication of the local population, not only for fairness and efficiency (Larson & Jesse, 2010) in exploitation, but also for the survival of nature itself.

Some of the restricted uses of the forest and its resources are linked to cultural taboos. There are equally glaring contradictions between the legislation on protected areas and the cultural beliefs of the natives. For the Pygmies, hunting is not just a synergetic activity as most foreigners would imagine, but more importantly an “art” and “science” of their very existence. As demonstrated in Ndameu (2001), the hunting of an elephant in Pygmy culture is an activity of particular value. Every male Pygmy aspires to kill one without some sophisticated weapon but instead with his bare hands or traditional weapons, in order to be recognized and to ascertain social nobility in his lifetime. Note that the restraining character of the regularization in southeastern Cameroon does not militate in favor of concerted management national parks, and gives way to a high acculturation of the Bantu and Pygmy communities. Every day, the local communities are in a perpetual “fight for recognition” (Honneth, 2010) of access rights and of use of the forest, so as to avoid acculturation. Like the Bagyelli natives of southeastern Cameroon, they wish to obtain their “rights of recognition” in the management of the forests. Those services in charge of the conservation of the Campo-Ma’am National Park in southern Cameroon did sign in November 2011 with Bagyelli Pygmies a “Memorandum of Understanding” to create favorable conditions in the management of the parks. This convention is based on the Bagyelli’s collection of non-timber forestry products, and practice of ritual hunting such as the killing of an elephant, in initiation rites. This convention further allows these people the right to worship their guardian spirits or ancestors and perpetrate this tradition, and constitutes a sustainable and concerted management approach of protected areas.

The Difficult Co-existence between the Local Communities and the Conservation Projects

In Cameroon, the conservation measures including forestry exploitation have been marked by a strong influence of the state, and southeastern Cameroon is no exception. The co-existence between the projects and Bantu and Pygmy populations has proved to be quite difficult. These two parties’ objectives and ambitions about the environment are, by nature, different. In southeastern Cameroon, the tensions and conflicts relating to the operations of managing national parks exist on a daily basis.

In the southeastern region, sometimes realized forcibly, the expulsion of resident populations is often accompanied by the creation of national parks. In 2000, The Baka Pygmies of the Djamenia Camp, situated near the Boumba Bek National Park west of Moloundou, had been forcefully deported from the interior of the reserve. Repeated expulsions of this sort do not merely aim at displacing or taking away the local population from the rightful forest locality, but also restrain their right of access to the area and the exploitation of its natural resources. Forest management in the southeastern region depends on the configuration of institutions by the state, which has to regularize the sector (North, 1986; Rutherford, 1996).

Traditional activities of hunting, harvesting, gathering, and ritual practices are often prohibited and reprimanded through “strong reprisal measures” (Yamo, 2011). The objective of these operations is constituted by the Rapid Intervention Brigade (BIR) and the forest guards. Their duty is to track down local poachers and discourage any other person who dares carry out unauthorized activities in the protected areas (Yamo, 2009). Such an operation was carried out in June 2009 by a mixed brigade. By these methods, referring to the “strong reprisal measures” to control protected zones, the services believe they can limit what they qualify as “environmental stress.”

The local communities consider the installation of national parks in their natural habitat as an interference of their livelihood (Bahuchet, 1993). This situation is far from the reality and the paradigms of sustainable development of Ostrom (1990), and from the transfer of competence in the management of natural resources propounded by Karsenty (1999) and Salzman & Attwoot (1996). It is the denial of local community rights of recognition suggested by Honneth (2010). The Bantus and Pygmies have been fighting for recognition and legalization of the rights of ownership and management of the forest. This challenging cohabitation between the conservation services and the local communities is detrimental to the creation of a veritable platform for common management of the protected areas.

CONCLUSION

The principal objective of this paper was to highlight the existing conditions of the people of the southeastern region of Cameroon, in the advent of decentralization and conservation. We began with a reminder of the different historical trajectories of decentralization and conservation, so as to establish the relation that exists between the two paradigms in the management of the environment in tropical Africa. This argument has enabled us to understand how decentralization and conservation became instituted as dominant paradigms in matters of management of forest zones.

The decentralization paradigm began to spread in a manner concomitant to that of the conservationists at the beginning of the 1990s. Inheriting colonial practices, it progressively became institutionalized from one point of view regulatory in Cameroon. At the same time, concerning this dynamic regulatory mechanism, these paradigms have, over time, been translated into diverse control mechanisms in the management of the environment (such as protected zones) which regulate

forestry management.

Behind this apparent institutional will, these measures negate the local communities' rights. These measures thus do not provide an adequate legal framework for a participatory approach. The stereotypical traditional practice inherited from the colonial time continues to serve in stigmatizing endogenous forms in forestry management. The shift from a centralized management to a participatory approach can only lead to a social process with a large-scale impact on the environment. This is the operational legislative framework, and their modus operandi does not yet help to succeed in durable management of the forest.

It is therefore necessary to change perspectives, and to reconsider the definitions of success in the decentralization process and the conservation of the environment. This implies the joint efforts of different stakeholders, values, and productive uses. This process requires a social dialogue with local communities that must aim to appropriate this new approach of forestry governance.

NOTE

- (1) Sustainable management has been consecrated since the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Summit, which aimed at reconciling economic, environmental, and social issues (Leroy et al., 2013).
- (2) The signatory member states of this convention are Great Britain, Germany, Italy, France, Portugal, and Congo.

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